THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF SOCIETY
Feb 1973

An Army Career That Wasn't

SOLDIER. By Anthony B. Herbert, with James T. Wooten. Illustrated, 498 pages. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. $10.95.

BY EDWARD L. KING

Twice in the past twenty years American soldiers have died in Asian wars that had little relation to the defense of our national security. The U.S. Army developed a philosophy for fighting these limited wars: create layers of rear-area headquarters to help senior officers qualify for promotion and let draftees become the battle casualties. Hundreds of career officers have frantically played military politics to get to Vietnam, lest they fall behind in the promotion sweepstakes and higher-paid retirement.

Lt. Col. Anthony B. Herbert, who became something of a *cause célèbre* nearly two years ago for his disclosures about war crimes in Vietnam and his harassment by the army, was one of those who volunteered and pulled strings to get assigned to a U.S. unit in Vietnam. Despite assignments there in 1965 and intimate knowledge of the CIA-run "Phoenix" assassination program, still, as late as 1968, Herbert "believed we were in Vietnam to do good." In his words he "wanted to fight." He got to Vietnam, finally obtained a battalion command slot, fought, killed, and ordered young Americans to their deaths.

Yet Herbert has now written (with James T. Wooten, a reporter with the *New York Times*) a book, in which he says, "The whole damned U.S. Army in Vietnam was crazy." He deplores the "lack of command leadership" by officers who directed combat operations from helicopters circling at 1,500 feet. About this Herbert says that "the birdmen may have been commanders in the technical sense of the word, but they weren't leaders and the grunts knew it." He repeats several charges about faulty army leadership, policies, and organization that others have been making publicly since 1969. For example, he focuses on the stupidity inherent in rotating combat commanders every six months. "We were filling combat slots with ticket-punchers who were there to get one more credit on their record and then be on their way to greener pastures. They had little motivation except career impulses. Generally they failed to understand their men and regarded them simply as things to be used." This inane policy contributed to the needless death of hundreds of draftees. But even more tragic is the fact that this same command policy was used during the Korean War to facilitate career promotions and was judged a dismal failure. Why did the army repeat the mistake in Vietnam?

Herbert discusses the "cover your ass" mentality of the elitist "WPPA"—the unofficial but nonetheless very real West Point Protective Association." And he spells out how this clique of West Point graduates managed the army in Vietnam for their career purposes. He tells how these non-leaders helped each other to the best assignments and awarded medals for valor by roster. The book's main contribution comes through Herbert's enumeration of the war crimes he witnessed in Vietnam. Although *Soldier* often becomes tedious with details of the personal clash over charges of crimes connected with the 173rd Brigade, between Herbert and Col. J. Ross Franklin, who is the villain of the piece, this does not diminish the importance of its central theme of unpunished war crimes. Despite an understandable tendency to justify his own emotions and actions, Colonel Herbert presents a shocking picture of the U.S. Army involved in torture and murder. Even more chilling are examples of how his superiors and fellow officers were more interested in protecting the brigade and their own reputations than in investigating the crimes.

Some may wonder why an officer as aggressive as Colonel Herbert did not vigorously press his charges to the highest command levels earlier, when it became apparent to him that his immediate superiors were stalling and covering up. The army will no doubt claim that Herbert's concern with the war crimes came forth only after he was relieved of command and saw his career ambitions shattered. But this should not detract from the substance of what Colonel Herbert has to say about Vietnam and an army leadership that countenanced and covered up torture and murder.

Herbert's case is weakened by the inaccuracies and inconsistencies that appear throughout the book. It doesn't help his credibility to be once again described as "the most decorated enlisted man of the Korean War." This is not true if only U.S. decorations for valor are considered. His account of picking up a British agent in the middle of a desert is fascinating reading—but it doesn't explain how he, the pilot, and the "fat guy" agent then fly out in a two-seater "Hunter Hawker" (i.e., Hawker Hunter) that Herbert calls in. And since when did General Ridgeway replace General MacArthur in command in Korea in 1950? Such errors—and many others—may seem minor, but in context of the importance of the issues involved they are damaging indeed.

It also seems less than wholly truthful to portray Herbert as a boy with a single, burning ambition to be a soldier, who later becomes a supersoldier destined for high command. It is a portrait that doesn't quite square with the fact that each of Herbert's enlistments was for the shortest time allowed. And he ended his first enlistment as a PFC—hardly the record of a boy who contemplated making the army his career. Those of us who also served as teen-age soldiers during the same period as Herbert remember that few volunteers left Mr. Truman's "new regular" army as privates; rank was easy to make. Herbert came home from Korea in 1951 as a sergeant. He was not the recipient of one of the battlefield commissions that were so liberally awarded to outstanding soldiers in Korea during 1950–51. His commission came at age twenty-six after he had left the army a second time, and it was only a provisional National Guard direct commission, obtained, as he says, through the intercession of a local congressman. This is not the record of a supersoldier.

The sad truth is that despite Colonel Herbert's personal bravery and troop-leading ability he could never have expected "a career that would end at the highest levels." And this is the sickness and the sadness of the U.S. Army today. It is WPPA ticket-punchers—who don't make waves—who achieve high-level command. Soldiers such as Herbert inevitably become disillusioned, and if they voice their concerns they are harassed, denigrated, and driven out of the army.

The American people are the ones who lose. They had better demand a halt to such practices and a thorough reform of their army if they expect it to defend them. □

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